

CLAIMS

I/We claim:

- [c1] 1. A method for controlling exposure to liability for non-payment by a service consumer and controlling costs associated with requesting payment when a service provider provides services to a service consumer, the method comprising:
- specifying a number of services within a billing unit for the service provider and the service consumer;
 - generating a sequence of codes from a start code to an end code, the number of codes in the sequence corresponding to the specified number of services within the billing unit;
 - providing the end code to the service provider via a service intermediary;
 - when the service consumer requests a service of the service provider, providing to the service provider one of the codes of the sequence from which the end code can be derived; and
 - when the service provider has been provided by the service consumer with the start code, requesting payment for the billing unit.
- [c2] 2. The method of claim 1 wherein the service provider specifies different number of services for billing units for different service consumers based on willingness of the service provider to be exposed to non-payment by that service consumer.
- [c3] 3. The method of claim 1 wherein specified number of services indicates the number of services for which the service provider is willing to be exposed to non-payment by the service consumer.

- [c4] 4. The method of claim 1 wherein the sequence of codes is generated by the service consumer.
- [c5] 5. The method of claim 4 wherein the service consumer selects the start code and provides a terminal code to the service intermediary.
- [c6] 6. The method of claim 1 wherein the sequence is generated using a one-way function.
- [c7] 7. The method of claim 1 wherein the specified number of services of the billing unit is selected to control incurring costs associated with requesting payments.
- [c8] 8. The method of claim 1 wherein when a service consumer disputes that the service provider provided services, the service intermediary resolves the dispute.
- [c9] 9. The method of claim 8 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code can be used to generate the sequence of codes, determining that the service provider wins the dispute.
- [c10] 10. The method of claim 8 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code cannot be used to generate the sequence of codes, determining that the service consumer wins the dispute.
- [c11] 11. The method of claim 1 wherein the specified number of services in a billing unit is based on costs associated with the service consumer registering with the service intermediary.

[c12] 12. The method of claim 1 wherein the service intermediary generates the sequence.

[c13] 13. The method of claim 1 wherein the service provider provides services requested by the service consumer.

[c14] 14. A method performed by a service provider for controlling exposure to liability for non-payment by a service consumer and controlling costs associated with requesting payment, the method comprising:

providing to a service intermediary a number of services within a billing unit for the service provider and the service consumer;

receiving from the service intermediary an end code for the billing unit; for the number of services,

receiving a request from the service consumer to provide a service, the request including a code; and

when it can be verified that the end code can be derived from the code included in the request, providing the requested service; and

after the number of services have been provided, requesting payment for the billing unit

wherein the service provider can use a start code included in the last received request to demonstrate that the service consumer requested the number of services.

[c15] 15. The method of claim 14 wherein the service provider provides different numbers of services for billing units for different service consumers based on willingness of the service provider to be exposed to non-payment by that service consumer.

- [c16] 16. The method of claim 14 wherein the number of services indicates willingness of the service provider to be exposed to non-payment.
- [c17] 17. The method of claim 14 wherein the end code is derived using a one-way function.
- [c18] 18. The method of claim 14 wherein the number of services of the billing unit is selected to control incurring costs associated with requesting payments.
- [c19] 19. The method of claim 14 wherein when a service consumer disputes that it requested a service of the service provider, the service intermediary resolves the dispute.
- [c20] 20. The method of claim 14 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code can be used to derive the end code, determining that the service provider wins the dispute.
- [c21] 21. The method of claim 14 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code cannot be used to derive the end code, determining that the service consumer wins the dispute.
- [c22] 22. A system to control exposure to liability for non-payment by a service consumer, the system comprising:
a component that receives an indication of a number of services to be requested of the service provider by the service consumer;
a component that generates a sequence of the number of codes using a one-way function; and

a component that provides an end code of the sequence to the service provider

wherein when the service consumer requests a service of the service provider, the service consumer provides to the service provider one of the codes of the sequence so that the service provider can verify that the provided code is a code of the sequence, and when the service provider has been provided by the service consumer with a start code of the sequence, the service provider indicates that the service consumer requested the specified number of services.

[c23] 23. The system of claim 22 wherein the service provider indicates that the service consumer requested the specified number of services when requesting payment.

[c24] 24. The system of claim 22 wherein the service provider specifies different number of services for different service consumers based on willingness of the service provider to be exposed to non-payment by that service consumer.

[c25] 25. The system of claim 22 wherein specified number of services indicates the number of services for which the service provider is willing to be exposed to non-payment by the service consumer.

[c26] 26. The system of claim 22 wherein the sequence of codes is generated by the service consumer.

[c27] 27. The system of claim 26 wherein the service consumer selects a start code for the sequence and provides a terminal code to the service intermediary.

- [c28] 28. The system of claim 22 wherein the specified number of services is selected to control incurring costs associated indicating that the service consumer requested the specified number of services.
- [c29] 30. The system of claim 22 wherein when a service consumer disputes that it requested a service of the service provider, the service intermediary resolves the dispute.
- [c30] 31. The system of claim 30 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code can be used to generate the sequence of codes, determining that the service provider wins the dispute.
- [c31] 32. The system of claim 30 wherein the service intermediary resolves the dispute by requesting the service provider to provide the start code and when the provided start code cannot be used to generate the sequence of codes, determining that the service consumer wins the dispute.
- [c32] 33. The system of claim 22 wherein the specified number of services is based on costs associated with the service consumer registering with the service intermediary.
- [c33] 34. The system of claim 22 wherein the service intermediary generates the sequence.
- [c34] 35. The system of claim 22 wherein the service provider provides services requested by the service consumer.